THELARACIO

Just what is it about Lara that has made her jump from being a mere collection of polygons to a first-name-only star in the same league as a Madonna or a Diana? Could it be her great beauty?

Could it be her excitingly robust figure? Can she really be considered an icon for our times? Or is it simply that she's the first good-looking character to appear in a game? VICTORIA COREN scratches her head as she tries to identify the Ingredient X that makes Lara such a potent symbol

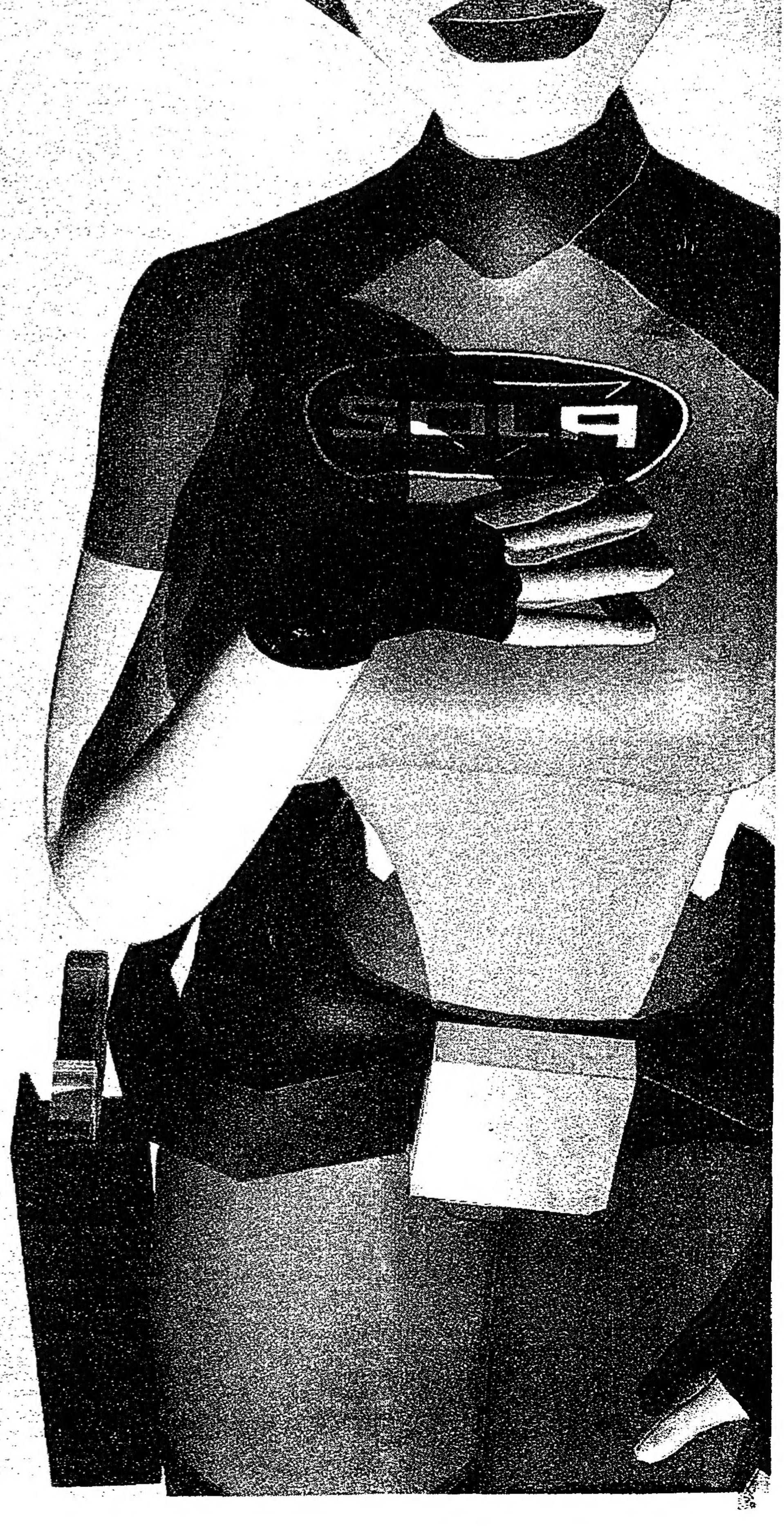
"She's the hottest thing out of Britain since the Spice Girls," says Adino from Spain. "And so is her set of, er, automatic pistols." "Will I ever meet a woman like her in real life?" demands Dave from Cambridge. "Bold, brave, beautiful, brilliant," declaims Jonty from Edinburgh, while Emanuel from Lyons murmurs only, "Les seins! Les seins!"

These are the cries of the international lovelorn, posting their heartache on the Internet - declaring their love in that techno-void because where else can they declare it? The object of their affections doesn't live anywhere. They can't send her flowers. They can't take her to dine at the Colombe d'Or. They can't pop liqueurs into her cute little mouth. They can't hold her hand on the banks of the Seine, or the Rhine, or the Thames or the Danube or the Nile. All they can do is press the right button to make her turn left.

In the hearts of the faithful, Lara Croft was born on Valentine's Day, the daughter of Lord Henshingley Croft. An adventurous young trustafarian, she persuaded her father to buy her a place on an archaeological expedition and thus began her celebrated life of tomb-raiding, butt-kicking and odds-bucking survival.

In reality (which is always less romantic), she was born in the minds of computer game creators at Core Design, Derby, in the mid-1990s, when they needed a new character to front the first Tomb Raider game from Eidos publishers. An adventurous young mass of polygons, her high pixel level enabled her to look terribly well-defined in hotpants and thus began her celebrated life of shifting an unprecedented number of games consoles. Tomb Raider has been granted "Millennium Product" status, and Lord Sainsbury (Minister for Science) told the Social Market Foundation that "I want recognized examples of our technological excellence such as Lara Croft of Tomb Raider, or the McLaren racing car, to become ambassadors for British scientific excellence."

Lara's picture has graced the front covers of The Face, FHM and Melody Maker, she has appeared in Rolling Stone, Time and Newsweek, and even done





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Page 3 in a "Battle Of The Cyberbabes". It must be galling for real-life aspiring models to be so firmly eclipsed by a mass of polygons. They must feel cheated enough when the best jobs go to women with silicone breasts, but when a babe who is artifically created from head to foot is getting all the magazine covers...ooh, it's enough to make your everyday model want to throw up her lunch. Which she usually wants to do anyway, so it's not all bad news.

Like any self-respecting celebrity chick of the 1990s, Lara Croft was soon being publicly linked with footballers and male pop stars. David James blamed a poor performance for Liverpool in 1997 on staying up too late playing Tomb Raider. The Prodigy claimed that the delay of their album release was due to too much time off working Lara's limbs. U2 played exclusive footage of her on their PopMart Tour. Damien Hirst and Jonathan Ross attended her birthday party - or at least, the launch party for Tomb Raider III. The Japanese actually have a disapproving term for devotion to animated characters: 'nijikon fetchi' (literally, 'two-dimensional fetish) and this phenomenon has never had a bigger target than Lara Croft. When the model Nell McAndrew made a personal appearance as Lara in Madrid, the crowds had to be held back by armed police.

Lara Croft is not the first cartoon woman that men have adored. Her crazy curves ("Les seins! Les seins!") are reminiscent of all those Disney sirens who have waltzed with brooms and tickled fauns for fifty years while children giggle, dads watch entranced and mums take another gloomy handful of popcorn. Who could refuse to wake Snow White with a kiss? What hand would not slide that glass slipper onto Cinderella's elegant foot? And many a man who should know better has daydreamed of Betty Boop or Jessica Rabbit curling round the living-room door and beckoning him with a vampish purr. Animated women have the bodies from heaven: fluid, technicolor, with measurements that defy physics.

Disney heroines of the past combined their extraordinarily pliant bodies with extraordinarily pliant personalities - but Lara Croft is not the first kick-ass cartoon babe. Her 'attitude' is right in the tradition of the impossibly busty superheroines in late 1960s American comic books. Catwoman, Batgirl and Wonderwoman didn't stand for any nonsense either. The difference is that Lara's backdrop is not a film or a comic, which invites passive enjoyment. We can control what she does. She is a character in a computer game: her survival within the world of the game depends on the instincts and reflexes of the player. Steven Poole, author of the forthcoming Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames (to be published by Fourth Estate in May) explains that "it is a commercial fact that good characters shift video games - a survey in 1990 showed that Mario

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from Donkey Kong was recognized by more
American children than Mickey Mouse. A good
character is one that the player likes because of a
fulfilled combination of dynamic and iconic criteria –
just as we like cartoon characters such as
Dangermouse. But when the character is under our
control we must also feel somehow protective and
anxious lest we cause the character harm through our
own manual inadequacy. That constitutes one very
strong motivation for playing the game well."

This was the genius of Core Design in opting for a female tomb-raider. The game-player would naturally want any old Indiana Jones to beat his enemies and win, but a female Indiana Jones arouses all the protective instincts immediately. And Miss Jones... you're beautiful!

The beauty issue is, of course, where controversy might lie. Like Disney heroines and Barbie dolls, Lara Croft maintains a figure to which no ordinary woman can possibly aspire – and she also shares with those other icons an audience of impressionable young girls.

"Japanese animation makes use of a bizarre, so-called 'deformed' style for its characters," explains Steven Poole. "Their videogame characters follow 'manga' [comic books] and 'anime' [animated cartoon films] in having huge heads and eyes, and tiny torsos. The Japanese audience wanted Lara Croft to be more 'manga-fied' – that is, for her body to conform to these 'deformed' standards. But Lara remained as she is – still deformed, of course, but in a more subtle and stereotypically Western chesty-and-wasp-waisted fashion."

One could easily be cynical about this international devotion to an impossibly-shaped fictional character with no real woman's flaws or indeed personality, who can be controlled at the touch of a button. But Poole argues in his forthcoming book that the reduced personality and unrealism are essential factors in Lara's appeal to women as well as men: "Lara Croft is an abstraction, an animated conglomeration of sexual and attitudinal signs (breasts, hotpants, shades, thigh holsters) whose very blankness encourages the male or female player's psychological projection and is exactly why she has enjoyed such success as a cultural icon."

Besides, we can all see the plus side of having an animated character as one of the world's biggest sex symbols. Adino from Spain, Dave from Cambridge, Jonty from Edinburgh and Emanuel from Lyons need never be disillusioned, for Lara will never lose her looks nor become embroiled in scandal like so many of our flesh-and-blood heart-throbs. She will never get caught doing anything really terrible, like taking hard drugs, or going to a polo match with Rod Stewart.